

Migration and Human Rights in El Salvador

by ALLISON RAMIREZ



SALVADORAN migrants are known as “tres veces mojados” because they must cross three border-rivers on their journey north to the United States. While folks from the U.S. no doubt consider the Rio Grande, or Rio Bravo, to be the most infamous, it is the Rio Suchiate dividing Mexico and Guatemala that represents

the beginning of the most perilous part of the journey for Central Americans. Upon entering Mexico, Central Americans descend into “undocumented” status, essentially a license to become victims of assault, kidnapping, rape, and murder at the hands of organized crime and both local and national Mexican authorities. While these abuses are well documented by Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission and the United Nations, recent years have only seen an upswing in the violence, including the massacre of 72 migrants in Tamaulipas, Mexico, in 2010 and the discovery of many more clandestine graves in 2011. On the other end of the line are hundreds of families waiting to hear news of their loved ones while at the same time trying to survive the very conditions of poverty and insecurity that push hundreds of Central Americans to leave their homes each day to embark on this journey.

I first became acquainted with this issue in the summer of 2006, as I read through the case files of hundreds of migrants who had disappeared one day, never to be heard from by their families again.

CARECEN International, a small Salvadoran NGO, had gathered these stories, bits and pieces of information and documentation, from distraught mothers and wives who had found no recourse through institutional means to search for their loved ones. I was assigned to make phone calls, contacts with migrant houses and human rights organizations in harm’s way, to scan pictures of the missing to see if anyone had noticed this traveler in particular among the multitude headed north. To me, it was a needle-in-the haystack search. The families, however, managed to maintain an enduring hope that somehow their case would be resolved.

Entering the University of Texas at Austin in 2009, I knew that these issues would be at the cornerstone of my research as part of the LLILAS program. I have pursued both my academic and advocacy interests as a dual-degree student with the LBJ School of Public Affairs, combining a professional policy focus with a rigorous research agenda. At the heart of it all has been a continuing relationship with the family members, who pulled together during that first summer to form COFAMIDE, the Committee of Family Members of Migrants Who Have Died or Disappeared. Over the course of the spring 2011 semester and into the summer, I was able to return to El Salvador to pursue independent coursework on COFAMIDE’s evolving advocacy strategies with the Salvadoran government, while at the same time continuing to provide technical, administrative, and moral support to the organization. Working at the intersection of policy and academia has been a unique and rewarding experience that I’m not sure I would have had the chance to pursue outside this graduate program.



Family members of the disappeared advocate for search of loved ones.



Families manage to maintain hope that somehow their case will be resolved.



Right before I came to Austin in 2009, I was able to witness the most historic political moment to occur in El Salvador during its modern history: the ascendancy of a left-wing political party to the presidency. The FMLN party, with its roots as the guerrilla organization fighting for social change during the Salvadoran civil war, was elected on a platform of change with moderate candidate Mauricio Funes at the helm. Many human rights organizations, including COFAMIDE, were anxiously anticipating an about-face in human rights policies, after what they considered to be years of rejection and dismissal by previous administrations. COFAMIDE, finding little concern for the issue at home, had previously staged a *Caminata de la Esperanza* to Mexico, meeting with local authorities and voicing their concerns. A transnational advocacy network of activists in Mexico and Central America had emerged, serving as an alternative source of information while trying to use their moral leverage to spur their governments to action.

With the election of the FMLN, COFAMIDE hoped the government would assume its obligations to its citizens: pressure Mexico to protect transit migrants, provide support for repatriations, and begin a program of reparations for the victims. Although several key figures were replaced within the government, many lower level officials remained. Despite good intentions, change, as we have learned in the United States as well, is slow. COFAMIDE did not hesitate to partner again with international allies to pressure its own government on human rights policies.

Notable among these initiatives is the first attempt at a regional DNA database to compare samples taken from family members with unidentified bodies that are most likely migrants. The main protagonist: the Forensic Anthropology Team of Argentina (EAAF, for its initials in Spanish), a world-renowned group of professionals that began in Argentina, identifying the disappeared of the Dirty War. Years ago, the EAAF worked to exhume the massacre and identify the dead at El Mozote, one of the largest that took place during El Salvador's 12-year civil war. Now, the EAAF finds itself identifying a new generation of those who have "disappeared," although the fundamental reasons for these phenomena remain the same—structural poverty, marginalization, and the attempt to escape these conditions, whether by taking up arms or fleeing the country.

While it is a noble initiative that will help resolve the uncertainty that plagues hundreds of Salvadoran mothers, fathers, spouses, and children, the activists I work with believe it never would have taken off without international pressure from the EAAF. Fears of image problems can still go a long way to help cut the bureaucratic red tape and muster the political will to move forward. The hope is that this project will continue to grow, and that unidentified bodies throughout Mexico and the U.S.-Mexico border will be exhumed and tested against the samples provided from families waiting for a match. Five years ago I never would have imagined that I would be present for the start of this project, but I do hope that five years from now I will have seen more than one match made and more than one family brought out of uncertainty; that there will be enough political will on all sides of the border(s) to remove the curse of being "tres veces mojado." 🌞

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